

VZCZCXRO1647
OO RUEHROV
DE RUEHEG #0591/01 0971410
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 071410Z APR 09
FM AMEMBASSY CAIRO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2112
INFO RUEHXX/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CAIRO 000591

SIPDIS

FOR NEA, NEA/ELA AND DRL/NESCA
NSC FOR KUMAR AND KUCHTA-HELBLING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/07/2029
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [ELAB](#) [SOCI](#) [EG](#)
SUBJECT: APRIL 6 STRIKE AND PROTESTS FIZZLE INTO A NON-EVENT

REF: A. CAIRO 580
[B](#). CAIRO 468
[C](#). CAIRO 33
[D](#). 08 CAIRO 783

Classified By: Economic-Political Minister-Counselor
William R. Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

[1](#). KEY POINTS

-- (SBU) The strike planned by the "April 6 Movement" to protest political and economic conditions failed to disrupt normal traffic and business activity throughout Egypt, in contrast to the more successful April 6, 2008 strike.

-- (U) In downtown Cairo, there were a few demonstrations of 200-250 people calling for political reforms and halting gas exports to Israel. We saw a moderate security presence in downtown Cairo throughout the day. There were protests at universities in Cairo, but no significant demonstrations outside Cairo.

-- (SBU) Opposition parties and movements did not unite behind the strike.

-- (C) Civil society contacts dismissed the day's events as "insignificant," while "April 6" leaders tried to spin the day to us and the public as a success.

[2](#). (C) Comment: While activists and opposition politicians had low expectations for the April 6 strike, its failure highlights the opposition's inability to stage a unified, mass display of protest against the government. Popular discontent over rising commodity prices and labor tensions fueled the more successful April 6, 2008 strike (ref D), but this year's organizers failed to find a resonant rallying cry. In contrast to the mass protests against the Gaza war in December and January, the weak turnout on April 6 indicates that a divided opposition is unable to rally public support for political and economic reforms within Egypt. One civil society contact told us that while the "April 6 Movement" offered a fresh approach in 2008 by using Facebook to mobilize last year's strike, "April 6" has now become like the rest of the opposition -- internally divided, bureaucratic and disorganized. End comment.

Strike Fizzles

[3](#). (SBU) In comparison to the April 6, 2008 strike that noticeably quieted the streets of Cairo, "business as usual" characterized April 6, 2009. In Cairo, traffic was as heavy as usual during the morning rush hour, and normal traffic and activity continued throughout the day. Touring the downtown area around Tahrir Square at mid-day, we saw normal bustling activity, with pedestrians crowding the streets, and shops

open for business. On April 6, 2008, many downtown shops were closed and traffic was noticeably light. Although the "April 6 Movement" Facebook site asserted lighter business than usual on city streets, this was wishful thinking. Blogger Wael Abbas sent a public message via "Twitter" from Alexandria where he described the traffic as normal. APP Alexandria reported normal traffic and activity. The talk in downtown Cairo coffee shops and in press coverage focused on the strike's failure.

Fragmented Opposition Support

¶4. (SBU) In addition to the "April 6 Movement," which called for the strike to protest political and economic conditions, other opposition forces lent lukewarm support without providing leadership or direction. (Note: "April 6's" specific demands are a new constitution limiting presidential power and expanding political rights, raising the minimum wage, and halting gas exports to Israel. End note.) Anwar Sadat's unregistered Reform and Development Party staged a small demonstration of about 50 people against gas exports to Israel outside State Council court deliberations that took place on April 6. The court hearing was postponed until May 4 (ref C). Ayman Nour had vacillated over committing his support for the strike, and ended up leading a separate protest of about 200 people outside the same court to demand political reforms, such as a new constitution and increasing registered political parties. After deliberating for weeks, the Muslim Brotherhood decided in late March to "support" the strike, but not to participate. The socialist opposition

CAIRO 00000591 002 OF 002

Tagammu party rejected the strike, dismissing the "April 6 Movement" as "amateurs."

Security Presence and Demonstrations

¶5. (SBU) We saw a moderate security presence in downtown Cairo throughout the day. A small number of security trucks with riot police were stationed at key intersections around Tahrir Square, and near the Bar Syndicate. Riot police casually idled inside their trucks, but did not station themselves on the street. There was a heavier security presence around the Egyptian Trade Union Federation in downtown Cairo, where police prevented "April 6" from holding a demonstration. We saw police preventing local and foreign journalists from reaching the federation.

¶6. (C) Credible human rights organizations reported protests on the Cairo University campus, and clashes between students and police at Ain Shams and Helwan Universities in Cairo. The reputable Arab Network for Human Rights Information issued a statement that police arrested three students at Ain Shams University. Another credible human rights organization told us that police arrested a photographer from leading independent newspaper "Al-Masry Al-Youm" who was trying to cover the Ain Shams University clashes. At midday, we saw approximately 250 protestors from various opposition parties and movements demonstrating in front of the press syndicate in downtown Cairo. All 86 Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated MPs and several independent MPs boycotted the Prime Minister's April 6 speech on the economy. There were press reports of very small demonstrations supporting "April 6" in Mansoura in the Delta and in Aswan in Upper Egypt.

Civil Society Activists: Nothing Happened

¶7. (C) Civil society contacts agreed the day was a non-event. "Nothing happened" was the refrain we heard repeatedly. Engi Haddad, Director of the Afro-Egyptian Organization for

Human Rights, pointed out the lack of serious action and preparation for this year's strike. Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights Director Hossam Bahgat characterized the demonstrations as "small, elite pockets of protest," which he termed as much less effective than recent labor protests by pharmacists and truckers. Bahgat said that even independent newspapers, such as "Al-Badeel," which had supported the strike, admitted its failure. President of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights Hisham Kassem was somewhat more charitable, calling the day a "rehearsal" for young activists who may be able to contribute more substantially in four to five years. He dismissed the day's activities as "far from significant."

"April 6" Spin

18. (C) In a conversation late in the day, "April 6" leader Ahmed Saleh tried to remain optimistic, claiming that the traffic had been lighter than usual and pointing to the day's protests as evidence of the group's successful efforts. He noted that "April 6" activists participated in the demonstrations at the Press Syndicate and the State Council court, but that the group's leaders, such as himself and Ahmed Maher, remained in hiding during the day to avoid arrest. Saleh said that "April 6" backed away from its previous calls for a strike at the last moment, encouraging people instead to protest in "other ways, such as demonstrating or wearing black clothing." Saleh termed the day's events a "success," asserting that the GOE failed to undermine "April 6's" activities. Another "April 6" leader, Ahmed Maher, inaccurately claimed in an internet statement that the group's protests drew "thousands" of supporters.
SCOBAY